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## THIRSTY

John 4:1-45

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The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman is a story about *desire*. It's a great story at any time, but especially during the Lenten season. During Lent, Christians choose to say no to desires for lesser things in order to focus on desiring God. There's no law *requiring* that we observe Lent; rather, God graciously invites us into deeper relationship with him. In the absence of obligation there's *opportunity* to engage in spiritual practices that will enrich our lives with God.<sup>1</sup>

## TRACING OUR DESIRES BACK TO GOD

Fasting is a remarkably effective practice for discovering and reordering our desires. The traditional Lenten fast involves abstaining from all food on Ash Wednesday, and then on every Friday up through Good Friday. There are many other kinds of fasts people choose to do as well, e.g. abstaining from certain foods, drink, pop culture (music, movies, television, news), technology, etc. In any case, the aim in fasting is to refocus our desires primarily on God. By abstaining from other things, we create more room in our lives for pursuing and enjoying God. For example, instead of eating lunch, you might go for a walk and talk with God, allowing him to satisfy your hunger. Or instead of watching a television program, you might sing praise songs to God, enjoying him. Or instead of scrolling through social media, you might meditate on the Bible and let God's Word inform your heart and mind.

However, it's not easy to refocus our desires on God. Every time I begin a new fast, I struggle to pivot from desiring the things I give up to desiring God. On Ash Wednesday, I was astounded to rediscover how much I really love to eat. After missing two meals, I found that I was sad because I was really, truly *missing* those meals! Further, I was too preoccupied with my empty stomach to be much good at prayer. Nevertheless, it was a very helpful discovery, because it established a starting point and a trajectory for the rest of my spiritual pilgrimage during Lent. As we often sing together, I am "prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I

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<sup>1</sup> The traditional spiritual practices of Lent come from the three pillars of Jewish piety: prayer, fasting and sacrificial giving. Jesus instructs his disciples on these three practices in Matthew 6:1-18 in his Sermon on the Mount.

love. Here's my heart, Lord, take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above."<sup>2</sup> Lent affords me forty days of intentionality to practice offering my wandering heart to God. It's a spiritual pilgrimage that I trust will be fruitful by the time Easter comes. I didn't realize how distracted I had become, but now that I know, I'm excited about the spiritual renewal that this season will bring.

Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman (John 4) follows the same path that we hope to take during Lent. The conversation is all about desire. It begins by focusing on two of the desires that are most familiar and common to all people. Jesus and the woman talk first about thirsting for water. Then they talk about the thirst for human companionship. In the end, their conversation turns to our greatest desire (whether we acknowledge it or not), namely our thirst for God. "As the deer longs for the water-brooks, so my soul longs for you, O God" (Ps 42:1). Any and every desire traced back to the source will ultimately lead us to God.

## **THIRSTY FOR WATER, THIRSTY FOR LOVE**

The setting for John 4 is Sychar on Mt. Gerizim, some 40 miles north of Jerusalem. Today it is the Palestinian city of Nablus in the West Bank. Just as today there are deep ethnic tensions between Jews and the Palestinian inhabitants of Nablus, there were also tensions in Jesus' day between Jews and the Samaritans who lived there. However, Jesus didn't go to Sychar to make trouble. Jesus was the greatest of all peacemakers. He went seeking the shalom of that city. Wary from the journey, Jesus arrived about noon (4:6). When the woman came to what was known as Jacob's well to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink" (4:7).

Modern readers tend to infer ethnic hostility in the woman's response to Jesus: "How is it that *you*, a Jew, ask for a drink from *me*, a woman of Samaria?" (4:9). It's unlikely, however, that this woman was trying to provoke or offend Jesus. Perhaps if she had been a Palestinian man the ethnic tension hypothesis might be more plausible. But this is a story of a *woman* and a man, and it happened at the town watering hole. Like our modern day pubs and watering holes, the well in the ancient Middle East tended to be a good place for lonely people to find one another. Several famous Old Testament romances began at wells—including Jacob's, the very man associated with the well in Sychar.

The Samaritan woman also had had a lot of experience with men. As Jesus would point out later in the conversation (4:18), she had been with five men and had moved on to number six. Now she was talking with yet another man—a bold foreigner, who scandalously broke with convention in order to strike up a conversation with her. She must have been wondering whether Jesus would be her lucky number seven.

Jesus could tell where she was headed, but instead of going back to her place, he led her down another path, tracing her own desires back to their source. He said (v. 10), "If you knew

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Robinson, "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing" (1757).

who you were talking to, 'the gift of God' (3:16), you would ask me for a drink of living water instead."

In Christian circles, "living water" has become so cliché that it's easy to miss what Jesus was saying. He wasn't trying to rebrand his ministry with a catchy, "spiritual" slogan. In those days, no one would have heard Jesus' words as being religious or spiritual. "Living water" was the way people described potable water. People would dig cisterns near their homes in order to collect rain water that could then be used for watering crops or bathing. But fresh water for drinking had to be "living water," i.e. it had to come from a clean source like a spring or a well. Thus, the Samaritan woman would have taken Jesus at face value. She would have understood him to be saying, simply, that *he* could give *her* drinking water. This would have then raised the very practical question that she posed in 4:11: "Given that you have no rope and bucket, how do you plan to draw this water out?"<sup>3</sup>

She also asked a follow-up question into which people often read ethnic hostility: "Are you greater than *our* father Jacob? *He* gave *us* the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock" (4:12). Was the woman really trying to pick a fight with Jesus over whose ancestry was legitimate? There was never any debate between Jews and Samaritans regarding their heritage. Everyone knew that both Samaritans and Jews were descended from Jacob. It's unlikely that the woman would have been trying to provoke Jesus this way.

Instead, what if she was talking about something else? What if she wasn't trying to provoke Jesus with hostility but was trying to make a connection? What if her reference to "our father Jacob," was a nod toward the ancient story of Jacob, the Jew, who fell in love with Rachel, the beautiful foreign maiden, whom he met at another well? (Gen 29) In that story, just like this one, Jacob came from a distance, and he arrived at a well in the heat of the day. But that time the well was covered by a huge stone. When Jacob saw Rachel, he was suddenly so overcome with passion that he exploded with strength and rolled away the stone all by himself. If there was any story Samaritan women knew about Jacob, it was that one. Now here was a Jewish man, a descendant of Jacob, coming to Jacob's well in the heat of the day, and offering to give the woman a drink. With Jacob and Rachel in the background, it seems much more likely that the woman was being suggestive and flirtatious rather than hostile.

Jesus was tempted just as we are, yet he didn't sin (Hebrews 4:15). He didn't get sidetracked either. He responded to the woman by saying that "living water" was indeed a double entendre, and much more than simply potable water: "Whoever drinks of this water (i.e. from Jacob's well) will be thirsty again. But whoever drinks the water I give will never thirst again because it will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (4:13-14).

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<sup>3</sup> It's a good question. The well is still there. Those who visit can use a winch to pull a bucket of drinkable water up from the bottom. It takes a couple of minutes to do so because the well is ~130 feet deep.

What was Jesus talking about? To the Samaritan woman, it must have sounded like Jesus was really into her, since he offered to give her a special gift. That's why she called his bluff saying, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water" (4:15).

Jesus then boldly took the woman another step further down the road of desire. He said, "Go call your husband and come here" (4:16). Jesus knew that for this woman, the deeper need that she felt was for *love*. Whatever she had experienced with the six men she had been with had not been enough to satisfy her deeper desires. She was more thirsty for love than for anything else. So she immediately responded to Jesus with a half-truth, saying "I have no husband" (4:17). In other words, she was saying, "I'm available." As with Rachel and Jacob, so also was the Samaritan woman ready for Jesus to sweep her off her feet.

Once again, Jesus refused to get sidetracked. Instead, he kept leading the woman to the source of her desires: "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true" (4:17-18).

Oh the shame! How could Jesus have known all of that? The woman had thought that Jesus was *into her*, but instead she discovered that he was *onto her*. He knew about all the others! He knew about her! She stood totally exposed before him in the noonday sun, immobilized.

How could she recover? By changing the subject: "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet" (4:19). (No kidding!) Then quickly another attempt to duck and cover by highlighting the main religious argument between Samaritans and Jews: "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship" (4:20). Only now do we come to the ethnic tension, and with good reason. The Samaritan woman intends to put a wall between herself and Jesus, to stop the bleeding and put an end to her humiliation.

However, instead of driving Jesus away, she was in fact continuing on with him to the ultimate source of her desires. In Jesus' response to the woman in vv 21ff, he drew together several important themes from earlier chapters, like Jesus being the new and eternal temple from ch 2, and the importance of being born again by the Holy Spirit in ch 3. Pulling all of this together, Jesus explained to the woman that our heavenly Father—whom Jews used to worship at the temple in Jerusalem while Samaritans tried to claim for themselves there on Mt. Gerizim—would soon be accessible to all people everywhere through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In other words, something even better than a new husband was about to be made available to the Samaritan woman. She would soon have direct access to God.

With that, she got it. The light clicked on and she said to Jesus, "I know that Messiah, the Christ, is coming" (4:25). Jesus said to her in response, "I who speak to you am he" (4:26). Jesus had not been endeavoring to shame her. Instead, Jesus had wanted to lead her beyond

her thirst for a new husband, all the way back to the source, to God himself. More than anyone else, God was who she was longing for. In fact, all our desires ultimately point us back to him.

## **WE ARE FAR TOO EASILY PLEASED**

You may remember from introductory psychology learning about Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). If you do, you probably remember the iconic pyramid diagram for this theory. The diagram shows our essential physical needs at the base of a pyramid, and then above those are areas of social need, and then at the very top is what Maslow described as "self-actualization," i.e. becoming the person you were made to be. I was reminded of Maslow's hypothesis while reading John 4 because the passage demonstrates a similar hierarchy: physical thirst, relational thirst, religious thirst.

Years ago when I studied psychology, the big takeaway from Maslow was that a person couldn't get on with living a healthy, happy, creative life until his or her more basic needs at the bottom of the pyramid were met. So, as Maslow's theory goes, food and shelter and security and healthy relationships all must be in place if we're going to reach full potential. What's really interesting about this today is that in his later years, Maslow often wondered why more people's lives didn't play out according to his theory. Why were there so many people who had all their essential needs met, and yet they never made it to the top of the pyramid. In other words, why did so many otherwise healthy people never reach "self-actualization"?

I can think of no better answer than what CS Lewis gave in his Weight of Glory sermon. Lewis said:

It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, I am far too easily pleased with food and drink and pop culture and all manner of other distractions. It takes the season of Lent, with the intentionality of setting aside a host of lesser desires, in order to remember the one who is at the headwaters of my thirst, God himself.

Think for a moment about your own desires. When you have time to kill, what do you turn to in order to find satisfaction? Perhaps you have some dark addiction, like porn or liquor or overwork. Or perhaps it's something less pernicious, like good food, or a good television program. Whatever it is that captivates our hearts and our attention, God is calling us back to the headwaters, to find deeper and lasting satisfaction in him. Come to the fountain and never thirst again.

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<sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," *Theology* 43:257 (1941) pp 263-274.

How do we do it? How do we find our way back? Through Jesus. He's our guide. He invites us to lay aside our distractions and follow him. When we give him our hearts, our time, our treasures, he leads the way back to the Father, to a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

In the opening pages of his autobiography, St. Augustine wrote "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."<sup>5</sup> We are far too easily pleased—but our thirst is never satisfied—until we return to drink from the fountain.

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<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, Book I.